Bring Your Own Device (BYOD) and Equitable Access to Technology

by HELEN R. ADAMS

COUNTLESS RECENT ONLINE communications are devoted to managing use of personal technology devices in schools—and questions about these devices abound. Can faculty bring their own mobile technology to work? Are students allowed to connect personal devices to the school's network? Who assumes liability for damage or loss of a student-owned device? Less frequently asked is, how will students from impoverished families have equitable access to technology under a "bring your own device" (BYOD) policy?

EQUITY: AN ETHICAL DILEMMA

In public schools, instructional resources and technology should be available equitably to every student regardless of socioeconomic status. Under BYOD, schools face an ethical dilemma when some families are financially unable to provide personal technology for their children. The problem is real, and the 2010 statistics for poor and homeless Americans are astonishing:

- 16.4 million or 22% of all children lived in poverty, with children of color experiencing higher rates than do white children (University of Wisconsin-Madison).
- More than 18% of U.S. children had at least one unemployed or underemployed parent, compared with 9.1% in 2007 (Mishel 2011).
- One in 45 or 1.6 million children were homeless, a 38% increase since 2007 (National Center on Family's Homelessness 2010).

Some educators question whether all students should be restricted from using their personal technology in school because their economically disadvantaged peers do not have similar tools, and the disparity in the "real world" is often cited as justification.

According to "Economic Barriers to Information Access: An Interpretation of the Library Bill of Rights,"

"Librarians and governing bodies should look for alternative models and methods of library administration that minimize distinctions among users based on their economic status or financial condition."

Office for Intellectual Freedom. *Intellectual Freedom Manual.* 8th ed. American Library Association, 2010: 110.

PARENTS AND BYOD

Parents are partners with schools, and to gauge community support for BYOD, Jan, a technology director in the Midwest, disseminated a survey. Amid positive responses, parents had concerns about students' sense of responsibility; the potential for loss, theft, and damage; inappropriate use while in class; upgrades as technology changes; the potential for bullying; and families who cannot afford personal technology for school use. A few expressed apprehension about the emotional distress of students without personal devices, with one parent asking, "What if you are the one kid in a class without a laptop?" (Jan, email message to author, January 3, 2012). Although educators may propose sharing of students'

personal devices in a classroom, some parents did not want their child to let others use their expensive technology. Still other parents preferred the district buy the necessary hardware.

PROVIDING EQUITY IN A BYOD WORLD

As advocates for equitable access, school librarians must exercise leadership and urge study of strategies that will provide technology resources for all students. Before a BYOD plan is implemented, these ideas need to be considered:

- **Share:** Does everyone need an individual hardware item, or can a group share a school- or student-owned device? According to Scott Floyd, an instructional technologist in Texas, "Our students do a lot of collaborative work. It's the only way to prepare them for the work world they will enter. Many of our teachers in elementary levels will not allow a [personal] device to be used unless the student is willing to at least share their screen. Sometimes students with devices will let others take over the driving of it with monitoring by the student who owns it" (Scott Floyd, email message to author, January 8, 2012).
- **Purchase/checkout:** In addition to allowing student-owned technology in classrooms, purchase hardware that can be borrowed from the library by a teacher for classroom use by students without personal devices.
- **Seek funding:** Approach community groups or foundations, or seek grant opportunities to secure funding of mobile equipment for circulation to disadvantaged students in school.
- **Community purchasing program:** Set mobile device specifications and work with district hardware vendors to offer discounts on new technology for families (Roscorla November 15, 2010).

Incorporating strategies for equity into BYOD programs creates a win-win situation for all students.

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